

Professor Helen Gilbert
Performance and Asylum: Embodiment, Ethics, Community
End of Year Report for 2007

Discussion between network members at various events designed to share research insights, questions and methodologies suggests that performance is playing a major role in communicating the experiences and needs of asylum seekers and refugees to their host communities. We have also found that theatre events about asylum are gaining in number and profile in Britain, particularly in community contexts, while in Australia there is a shift from verbatim to fictionalised representations of refugee stories. I think it is fair to claim that as a result of this network, asylum issues have gained a much higher profile in performance studies in Britain and Australia, and internationally, than they did previously.

The second year of the project has been devoted largely but by no means exclusively to developing the UK end of the network, the Australian end having been the focus for the first year. A symposium (February) and especially a 3-day conference (November) were very successful in bringing various researchers and practitioners together to explore the issue of performance and asylum from a number of angles. Over 70 people attended the conference over the three days, with members of the public attending an evening performance and talkback session by Actors for Refugees that was scheduled as part of the event. As well as involving network members in the UK and Australia, the conference attracted participants from Holland, France, Germany, USA and Canada, with a strong contingent of postgraduate research students, many of whom also gave papers.

With Dr Sophie Nield of the Central School of Speech and Drama, I have negotiated to co-edit a special issue of *Research in Theatre Education* focusing on refugee and asylum performance work. This issue, due out in 2008, will bring together some of the research findings of various network members' projects. Dr Nield has been invited as visiting scholar on a three-month fellowship to the University of Sydney in mid-2008 to continue her work on border-zones and asylum issues.

Network member Helen Nicholson has continued her practice-based work among migrant and refugee communities in Slough, however we found eventually that it would not be feasible to run a substantial theatre project in this community because of staffing changes among liaison practitioners at the community level. It was therefore decided that the seeding funding for community initiatives go to Attic Theatre instead to develop their work with refugee youth. Tina Muir, my network administrator, who is a student in applied theatre at Royal Holloway, has since begun part-time work with Attic on this programme.

A number of refugee arts practitioners and agencies in Australia have joined the network; these include Actors for Refugees, Version 1.0 theatre ensemble, Sidetrack Performance Group and the activist arts collective 'We are all Boat People'. In the UK the network has actively involved Oval House

Theatre, Attic Theatre, Ice and Fire, and Actors for Refugees (all London-based), and members of the In Place of War Project (Manchester). Apart from attending conference and symposia events, representatives of these organisations have generously shared information about theatre productions and practices via email lists and the like. A number of free-lance practice-based researchers have also benefited from the network's focus on developing critical concepts for thinking about theatre practice with/about asylum seekers. The artistic director of Jumblies Theatre, a major community initiative focusing on refugees in Canada also attended the November conference, along with representatives of the Somali community in London.